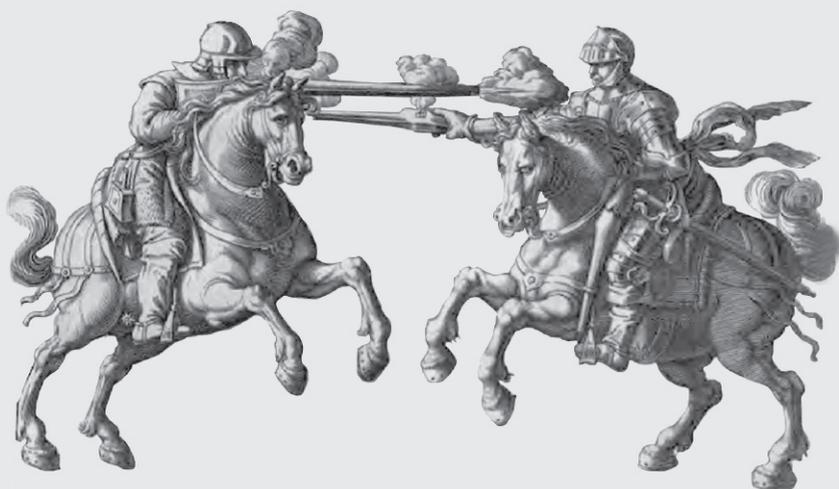


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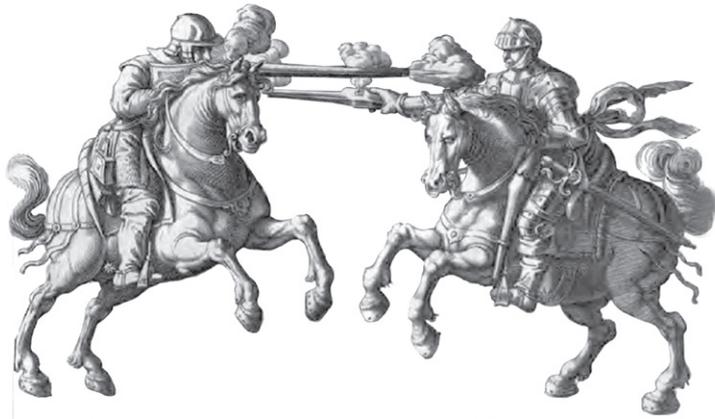
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How to study Military History



Modernisation Theory

and (some of) the conceptual flaws of the

Early-Modern Military Revolution

by JEREMY BLACK

Academic theories in the Humanities and Social Sciences gain traction not because of any inherent intellectual merit but because they are readily usable and very useful. The ‘pull’ dimension, the usefulness of a thesis, and, more especially, its usefulness in a particular context, is one that can be approached in materialist terms, whether filling textbooks and lecture slots or advancing academic careers, but also with reference to the value of an argument at a specific moment. Indeed, from that perspective, it is the unoriginal thesis that generally does best, as ‘thinking within the box’ or, at least, a similar box, helps to make a proposition readily digestible. The ‘push’ dimension is an aspect of the same factors, of material and ideological import. The key one is the ability to appear cutting-edge but in terms that are in practice somewhat predictable.

And so with the idea of an early-modern military revolution, a proposition that drew heavily on already established ideas and literatures of modernisation and, eventually, globalisation. These ideas had a long genesis, but the key origin was that of progress as measured in and by social development, an approach that put to one side religious notions of time as leading toward a millenarian outcome. If Montesquieu, Smith and Robertson are all key names in this intellectual project, it was in practice one of a longer pedigree, with notions of improvability in human life accompanied by that of development. These ideas lent themselves to nineteenth-century interest in scientific formulation and application.

Darwinism is part of the mix, as evolutionary ideas provided metaphors and concepts, notably what was to be termed functionalism, in the shape of serving goals necessary for survival and therefore strength.

These ideas affected new developing sciences such as sociology, geopolitics and anthropology, and were brought into academic history through a shared concern with modernity and therefore modernisation. Rational choice was seen as at play, from biological preference to economic and political practice, but there was a difference between an emphasis on constraints as, with Durkheim or with contingent outcomes, as with Weber. There was a parallel with geographical ideas of determinism or 'possibilism.' Weber's approach to modernity led him to define it in terms of rationality and standardisation, with motivation in terms of instrumental behaviour as opposed to traditional action. Weber also linked the prudent rationality related to capitalism with Protestantism. Taken into American thought by Talcott Parsons, Weber was the forbear of what was to be called the Structural-Functional approach, and Modernisation theory became a key tool in the Social Sciences, a theory emphasising rational abstract principles and an abandonment of past practices. Key texts included Walt Rostow's *Politics and the Stages of Growth* (1971) and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the latter a work propounded around the means, goals and modernity of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. In the 1960s, and again in the 1990s, modernisation was regarded as a form of global New Deal, able to create a new world order, and information and theory were deployed accordingly¹.

Modernisation theory, however, was often advanced with insufficient attention to practicalities, let alone reality, as with the failure to understand Vietnamese society. As a related, but separate point, the attempt to produce 'modern,' quantifiable criteria of military success fell foul of the ability of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to soak up heavier casualties and to

1 M.E. Latham, *Modernisation as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2000) and *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernisation, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, New York, 2011); N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, Maryland, 2003); D.C. Engerman, 'American Knowledge and Global Power,' *Diplomatic History*, 31 (2007), pp. 599-622.

defy American equations of success with their emphasis on quantification.² It would be easy to draw a line between these (and other) modernisation writers and the proponents of, and even more response to, the thesis of a military revolution, with Geoffrey Parker in particular offering a parallel account to Fukuyama. While that is apposite, there are other elements of modernisation theory that should first be addressed. A key one was that of secularisation, as again analysis, means and goal of development. Durkheim, Weber and many others argued that modernisation meant a decline in religious practice and significance, and this approach affected a broad tranche of writing in the Social Sciences and Humanities, as well as discussion of historical change.³ The cult of reason, understood as inherently secular, with faith banished to the private sphere, meant that the present necessarily understood the past better than the latter did: reason could reveal the prospectus to a better future and a better-understood past.

A circularity in thought and selectivity in evidence were inherent to this process, and both, indeed, were very much to be seen in the work by the proponents of a military revolution. As far as the first was concerned functions were presented in a quasi-automatic fashion, with needs and drives readily ascribed to states, and effects ascribed to functions while those functions were defined by the effects they produced.⁴

A key aspect of the cult of a modern reason, in terms of secularism and of other elements, is a total failure not only to understand the military cultures of the past (and even arguably the present), but also to appreciate the nature of development. Failing to perceive the values of the past and to understand its practices understandably leads to a neglect of key factors in the evaluation of proficiency, capability and success, both individual and collective. Honour is misleadingly disparaged as conservative if not redundant, and practices of aristocratic officership are misunderstood. A more informed comment can be found in the work of Gregory Hanlon,⁵

2 G.A. Gaddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York, 2011).

3 For a critique, J.C.D. Clark, 'Secularisation and Modernisation: The Failure of a "Grand Narrative,"' *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), pp. 161-94.

4 A. Hawkins, 'Modernity and the Victorians,' unpublished paper. I am grateful to Angus Hawkins for providing me with a copy.

5 See, in particular, G. Hanlon, *Italy 1636: Cemetery of Armies* (Oxford, 2016).

and it is instructive that his new book makes scant mention of the military revolution, a thesis that is presented as ‘argued to an indecisive end.’⁶

Revolution was a term in more than fashion in the twentieth century, reflecting not only political commitment, but also that it became the standard way to describe and explain structural change. This practice owed much to the industrial revolution, a term first used in 1799, but popularised by Arnold Toynbee in 1881, with significant capitals. This term was much applied thereafter, and was to be the basis for subsequent revolutions, as with the Agricultural Revolution.⁷ It was not therefore surprising that the term was deployed in military history. There were precursors, but the most influential argument was advanced in 1955 by Michael Roberts in a work published in 1956⁸ that liberally employed the idea of fundamental change and the term military revolution, and closed with a clear affirmation of transformation: ‘By 1660, the modern art of war had come to birth. Mass armies, strict discipline, the control of the state, the submergence of the individual had already arrived’ and so on, culminating with ‘The road lay open, broad and straight, to the abyss of the twentieth century.’ With its failure to grasp the nature of pre-1560 or post-1660 warfare, its neglect of navies and the global dimension, its failure to understand the requirements of command, and its simplification and misreading of modern warfare, this was a disappointing piece, a classic instance indeed of footnotes rather than foresight; but it was given publicity, not least in Sir George Clark’s *War and Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1958).

Parker was far more impressive with his inclusion of the naval dimension, his wider-ranging chronology, and his engagement with the world scale. Initially Parker focused on the Spanish dimension, but he broadened out with his hugely influential *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1988). That work deserves a careful reading as does the perceptive criticism by a number of scholars including Bert Hall, Kelly DeVries, and David Parrott. It is particularly instructive that Parker addressed the global question,

6 G. Hanlon, *European Military Rivalry, 1500-1750. Fierce Pageant* (Abingdon, 2020), p. xvii.

7 J.D. Chambers, and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1966).

8 M. Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560-1660* (Belfast, 1956).

employing ‘the Military Revolution of the sixteenth century’⁹ to in effect explain both the rise (and multipolarity) of the West and why it was to provide the most successful of the ‘gunpowder empires’ to employ a term probed by William H. McNeill. The strengths of Parker’s work can be qualified empirically, not least, but not only, by questioning the idea of a three-century revolution, or by reference to the limitations of Western success, the nature of late medieval circumstances, the importance of the post-1660 period, and, despite the brilliance of the footnotes, to the selection and deployment of evidence.

There are also, which is the intention of this note, debatable assumptions in terms of theses of modernisation, and the characterisation of capability. Parker’s emphasis on particular notions of proficiency, and his embrace of the proposition of change that is fundamental because described as revolutionary, and described as revolutionary because fundamental, fits within a practice of historical writing that increasingly looks very much that of a particular period. Alluding earlier to Fukuyama was deliberate because there are instructive parallels between the mindsets represented in these two works. Each appears qualified at the very least by the more varied presentation of modern warfare that the subsequent three decades were to offer. Parker very much takes modernisation theory on board: ‘the Muslim states ... could no longer meet and defeat the expanding repertory of innovations developed by their Christian adversaries, because the Westernisation of war also required replication of the economic and social structures and infrastructures, in particular the machinery of resource-mobilisation and modern finance, on which the new techniques depended,’¹⁰ which doubtless explains why the United States was invariably successful in the Islamic world over the last two decades, as well as Israel in Lebanon. Instead, it is the specificity of conflict and individual conflicts and the multivalent character of war, that emerge; and the language of modernity, modernisation, and revolution is misleading as an account, narrative and/or analytical, or this phenomenon.

9 G. Parker, ‘In Defense of *The Military Revolution*,’ in C.J. Rogers (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate* (Boulder, Colorado, 1995), p. 356.

10 Parker, *Defense*, p. 355.

